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Interview with Contemporary Armenian Writer and Translator Diana Hambardzumyan

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Abstract

A conversation with Diana Hambardzumyan, a contemporary Armenian writer, translator and lecturer in English Literature at the University of Yerevan, foregrounds a series of significant features of contemporary Armenian literature and the country's key social and cultural issues. She interconnects current events with the literary memory, highlighting and confirming the Armenian writers' need to maintain their traditional role as representatives of the cultural will of their people.

Keywords: Armenian literature, Diana Hambardzumyan, literary perspectives, writer's role

BT: *How does it feel being an Armenian writer in Armenia?*

DH: Oh, a good question to test the responder on her frankness. Being an Armenian writer in Armenia feels like being an Armenian in Armenia. What I mean is that even though most Armenians live all over the world as a largely dispersed Diaspora, about 3 million Armenians are still living in our motherland – the Republic of Armenia, where we feel indigenous, and yet it feels painful to see our civil and human rights regularly violated by our own countrymen – of the same root and blood. Armenian writers residing in Armenia are no exception in this regard. My personal feeling is that of isolation, regardless of the appreciation and love that I enjoy as a writer in my motherland due to the relatively large legacy: 18 published books (3 also in translation), containing stories that have been translated into 13 languages, and two literary prizes, alongside my Doctor in Philology degree and the title of Professor in Linguistics. Nevertheless, I cannot say that I feel like a part of any literary association or community (formal



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or informal) existing and functioning in Armenia (regardless of my affiliation with the Writers' Union of Armenia for over 12 years). I believe this feeling cannot be explained by either my nature as a creative individual or the principles I adhere to as a human being; I'm more than convinced that the reason is much deeper, perhaps even in my genes, which make me up as a non-conformist in a largely conformist society. So, frankly speaking, I feel like an outsider in my own country, inhabited by many generations of my ancestors who perhaps had the same feeling of alienation, so deeply coded and borne in our genes.

BT: *What's your sincere estimation of contemporary Armenian literature?*

DH: Contemporary Armenian literature has been created by talented and gifted writers, whose works are read, interpreted and highly acclaimed in Armenia; in several cases they are translated into various foreign languages, which brings them real fame abroad or at least some recognition among foreign writers and readers. In order not to show my compassion towards this or that pen-friend of mine, I'd rather avoid mentioning any name here, but for those who'd like to read contemporary Armenian literature, I'd advise to read the three-volumed *Contemporary Armenian* (Prose, Poetry and Drama) anthologies in English (2006).

BT: *Are you actively involved in your country's political and civil life? Do you think it necessary for a writer?*

DH: If by "being actively involved in" you mean being a member of any political party or participating in any rallies or rebellions against those in authority or the overall political system in my country, my answer is "no, I am not." But I am a rebel to the bone in my way of thinking, living, working, creating, and of course, writing my books. I believe that as a writer I am to be the change, which I want to see in my country and in the world. When writing I need to tell the truth about my country and my own self as a citizen of that country. Who else, if not me, is obliged to seek out the reasons of anomalies in the socio-political, economic, educational, cultural, national and international domains of our life; to raise questions is my duty as a writer, even if I am not the one to provide answers. Raising questions in literature means tolling a bell for human beings and the whole human kind, which is as necessary as raising an alarm in case of emergency.

BT: *Which are the themes and topics of your works? Why have you taken them up?*

DH: All the themes and topics of my works wind up around one and the same thing – the human being, an ordinary human, with no heroism, no screaming patriotism, a human, who lives in no drastic situations at all, but leads a life of a citizen, sometimes cheated and desperate and failing, sometimes prevailing, hopeful and caring.

I dare say I was not the one to select themes and topics, rather they chose me, or to say more accurately – they rather chose my writing, as their shelter, as if looking for frankness, understanding and forgiveness in it. I hope I haven't caused any disappointment to my themes and topics as yet. Even if I haven't lived up to their expectations, I still don't feel guilty, as I've never promised them more than I could give – in my writing.

BT: *Have you ever written any book that can become a bestseller?*

DH: In my opinion, writing a book, which can become a bestseller, has little to do with high criteria of literature as I see them. It rather deals with a perfectly conceived business project realized with professional marketing and implementation of PR technologies, than with an artistic work of ideal form and plot and style. To make a book bestseller, one should print it in millions of copies and have a large market to sell it in. There are about 600.000 potential book-buyers in Armenia, but as 420.000 of them are poor (70% of the population), only 180.000 are able to buy books, but actually only 1800 copies of a book by a famous author could be sold in a year, however if only 1000 copies are sold, then it is to be considered a bestseller in Armenia, yet this is a very rare thing in our reality.

BT: *Which are the Armenian readers' expectations from your standpoint? Do you perceive any difference between your compatriots' expectations and those of the international community?*

DH: Of course, my compatriots' expectations from my standpoint differ from those of the international community. Due to its long history with roots in the ancient past, the Armenian literature has shaped a demanding reading tradition with strict criteria of evaluation. If from generation to generation high criteria of literature perception and estimation have been exercised by the Armenians, nowadays requirements must be at least adequately high, if not higher. So, when writing a book, I first try to meet the Armenian readers' expectations and only after that to make the international readers' interested in my works. To sound more accurate, when writing, I forget everybody and everything surrounding me, I don't think of anybody's estimation, it is only afterwards, when rereading and editing the work that I try to criticize my work from my readers' standpoint.

BT: *Which are your relationships with the literary criticism both in Armenia and in the international environment?*

DH: Literary criticism is something controversial both in Armenia and in the international environment. If written in professional conscientiousness and righteousness, it is a must for writers and literature: as highly qualified

doctors from time to time should examine people to make sure of their health conditions, likewise literary critics from time to time should examine writers' works to preclude all kinds of illnesses and contaminations in order to avoid further disaster. On the other hand, if critics are partial and professionally not ready to perceive a literary work, such criticism can be fatal for both the writer and his/her work, sometimes even for the rest of his/her literary career. As for me, several reviews of my books have been published in literary periodicals both in Armenia and abroad, a few analytical articles have been written upon some of my works, nevertheless a thorough critical acclaim is still desired.

BT: *Who are your "mentors"?*

DH: The main "mentor" of mine is life itself; the important "mentors" of mine are the people I've come across with in my life, the valuable ones are the writers who were brave enough not to be afraid of experiments and failing, like William Faulkner and James Joyce in the World literature and Hrant Matevosyan in the Armenian literature.

BT: *Which are the works of the World literature you are in dialogue with? And which are those affecting your poetics?*

DH: There is no specific work of the World Literature which I'm in dialogue with and I could single out here, but still there are masterpieces which have much impressed me as a reader, among them *The Book of Sadness* by St. Grigor Narekatsi, a great Armenian writer of the 10th century, the *Bible*, the national epic of ancient Rome *Aeneid* by Virgil, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer, the greatest ancient Greek poet, the modernist James Joyce's *Ulysses* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (a few months ago I finished the translation of the latter into Armenian). I am an admirer of the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer's poetry.

As to my poetics, I try to make it free from the influence of my "favourites"; I am fond of experimenting and opening new paths on the fallows. To what degree I succeed in my attempts is left with my readers to judge.

BT: *In which way nowadays Armenian language has been changing? How has your job as a writer changed in the last decades?*

DH: The Armenian language has been changing alongside with the socio-political, economic and cultural changes my country has undergone. Every sphere of our life influences the language, bringing new connotations to words, coining new words, making dialectal words proper units of the whole word-stock, borrowing words and idioms from English, Russian, Persian and several other languages.

As to my job as a writer, it has also changed in the last decades, like everything is doomed to change in this world and perhaps in the other worlds, too. When I started writing my first stories and novelettes, I was eager to embrace the whole previous epoch of devastation, the ups and downs of the former Soviet Union, under the yoke of which my country existed for more than 70 years, peoples' mentality of those days, human tragedy when facing the changes all of a sudden, starting with Gorbachov's Perestrojka in the former Soviet Republics, the Republic of Armenia inclusive, in addition to the disastrous earthquake of the 1988's that shook a large area and killed more than 25.000 people, devastating much of the country's two northern regions.

A lot of social anomalies floated up to the surface after Armenia got its independence. Due to the mistakes of authorities, the corruption of the government and business world, the injustice people bumped into in everyday life, Armenians started emigrating from their motherland. As a writer I began to concentrate my attention on these themes and topics within the context of Europe, where intellectual emigrants preferred to continue their lives. My latest novel *Dury takum en* (2014; *A Knock at the Door*), which I started writing as a writer-in-residence in Vienna in 2011, was announced by my editor to be the first anti-emigration novel written in independent Armenia. The novel was first conceived to be on Armenia and an Armenian, who was the victim of injustice in his country, that's why he left it, becoming a refugee in Europe (I never thought of writing an anti-emigration novel), but after coming out, when it was labelled as that, then I thought it over and partially agreed to that interpretation.

BT: *What do you think of the current discussions of scholars and philosophers about the "back to Realism" concept?*

DH: Sincerely speaking, I am completely against any "ism" in literature, though I understand this is something inevitable in the vast variety of literary directions, within the context of scholars' attempt to see common features among writers, concerning the style, form and plot of their works. I guess Realism exists even in Romantics' works, let alone in Existentialism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. So, I can only add the "forward to Realism" concept to the scholarly discussions on the proposed "back to Realism" concept.

BT: *Are your works translated into any foreign languages? If yes, how did you manage to interest foreign publishers, if not, why not?*

DH: Yes, my works are fortunately translated into foreign languages. Several stories of mine are translated into 13 languages and published in anthologies and literary magazines in Romania, Croatia, Georgia, Russia, Persia, Ukraine, Egypt, Canada, and other countries. I am lucky to have a bilingual (Armenian-English) short-story collection *Top Ten Stories* (2011),

which was translated into German and published in Germany (*Telegramm an Fatima*, 2014); simultaneously it was translated into Russian and published in Russia (*Tjeljegramma fatimje*, 2014). It means I have three books translated into foreign languages, which is a good achievement for a contemporary Armenian writer living in Armenia. As a rule, my translators themselves find publishers abroad, so I hope this will happen to the French translation of my novel which is now being done in Canada, as well as to its English translation being fulfilled in Armenia, both by talented translators. My dream is to have it translated into Italian as well.

BT: *As I learnt from your talk, you travel much, participating in international writer-in-residence programs: do they give you any advantage for creating better?*

DH: Sure, they do. I happened to be in Austria (2011), Canada (2014) and Sweden (2016) participating in writer-in-residence programs. Travelling gives a writer new impressions and sensations, broadens the scope of world cognition, leads to debates with foreign writers, and provides new topics and themes for his/her forthcoming books. Nonetheless, I have to admit the relevance of a statement by William Faulkner, as an utterance of absolutely true contemplation: "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about, and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it" (Faulkner 2007 [1956], 56). It could be true about my little Armenia as well.

BT: *Have your works ever been awarded any national or international literary prizes? If yes, for what, if not, why not?*

DH: Since I've started writing books and getting them printed (my first book was *Astghakat* (1999; Milky Way, a novelette), I've written 6 fiction books, out of which the novel *Astso bnaketsrats yerkrum* (2010; In the God Inhabited Country) was awarded a prize "The best unpublished novel of 2008" in Armenia. This year I was awarded a prize "Kantegh" (lamp, luminaire) for my achievements in literary translation, for I've translated works by William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, William Saroyan, Peter Najarian, and several works by contemporary Armenian prose writers into English. I haven't got any international literary prize yet, but I hope to have it as soon as my novel *Dury takum en* (A Knock at the Door) is translated into English. At least, it deserves to be awarded, to my impartial and biased mind (I beg your pardon; I wouldn't like to sound arrogant, though I did).

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